ALIGNED AND RESISTANT COMMUNITIES: EXPLORING NEW CONDUITS FOR ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

The paper argues that a significant body of staff within the academy remain resistant to using new technologies within their teaching. It is suggested that the current paradigm targeting increased staff uptake within the in-house Learning Management Systems (LMS) has failed due to an over reliance on policy, fundamental flaws in translating and disseminating the work of early-adaptors, and an over reliance on tool-based professional development. The paper highlights the importance of providing clusters of staff with radically different mechanisms through which a pedagogical understanding of their teaching can be applied to a contextualized online environment. Here the Innovation, Technology and Pedagogy project (ITP) is presented as an alternative means of engaging with the LMS and also as an alternative means of generating new communities of learning centred on authentic online pedagogical engagement. The paper argues that the academy must continue to explore alternative models that allow for the full spectrum of staff to be included in a process of documenting, storing and disseminating techniques of learning and teaching with technology.

Keywords

online professional development, communities of learning, online pedagogy, online staff development

Introduction

Historically the number of pedagogical models in use within the Australian higher education sector has been extremely limited. Over the last decade however, the introduction of new technologies have increasingly been promoted as an enhancement to established pedagogical practices and even more recently, as a substitute to existing paradigms of teaching and learning (Burbules & Callister 2000). This concerted thrust towards engaging with teaching and learning online is clearly one of the more fluid discourses to have impacted upon the mediated student-teacher exchange within Australian universities. Clearly there is little respite ahead for anyone wishing to return to the pre-digital landscape for the radical move online has fundamentally altered the manner in which contemporary academic life is both formally described and actually practiced.

Radical transformations of any workplace are seldom seamless events. In the case of the academy's move online, and in particular in relation to online teaching and learning, we see the

cracks, or signs of resistance produced within counter discourses that echo powerful and culturally entrenched understandings of how content should be taught and how students should learn. It is the position of this paper that such collectively ingrained abstractions of how we teach, and how students learn, are discourses that have never been adequately addressed in the frenetic push by the academy to move online. This paper suggests that unless such resistant counter discourses are more effectively integrated into our overall understanding of the online teaching and learning framework, then a significant body of the academy will continue to remain isolated, alienated and disillusioned with the online teaching and learning medium.

The paper begins from the basic position that resistant voices to online teaching and learning constitute much more than a marginal assemblage of teaching academics and that despite rhetoric touting the academy as 'wired' to teach and students as eager to learn online, there remain considerable obstacles preventing 'resistant communities' from achieving an authentic engagement with the online environment. In short, this paper argues that despite a common interpretation of online teaching and learning as a compliance driven addition to workload, the fundamental impediments to getting resistant staff engaged with technology are not load driven. Rather, such issues predominately revolve around individual staff unease with many of the ICT-based technologies that are compounded by a communal, and by association collaborative, reaction to the manner in which the move online has been 'sold' to teaching staff.

One of the main aims of this paper is to explore and promote new mechanisms of connecting resistant communities with the University in-house learning management system (LMS). The paper begins by looking at the current paradigms of encouraging and supporting the move from face-to-face teaching to the adoption of online technologies. This is followed by a description of a specific professional development mechanism — termed the Innovation, Technology and Pedagogy project or ITP that has targeted staff not yet engaged in the online environment as indicated by the individual unit adoption rates of the in-house LMS, called Online Learning and Teaching (OLT). In it most simplistic form, ITP has rejected the customary promotion of online technologies through the selling of its techno-wizardry and the specialized tools it contains. In contrast, ITP has endorsed the position that resistant or sceptical staff are much more inclined to engage with online teaching and learning via an authentic connection to pedagogy. ITP has achieved this by developing an alternative instrument that allows a less threatening and more productive transition from face-to-face teaching to authentic online engagement.

The paper also explores the nature of communities that emerge within, around and against online teaching and learning. Of particular interest in this regard is how resistant communities constitute a potentially productive alternative source of input to the overall technology debate. It is also suggested, that in addition to providing less-techno savvy staff with a bridge to technology, instruments such as ITP provide avenues for more experienced users of the online environment to rearticulate their achievements. This is achieved through the capacity of ITP to generate non-technical pedagogically driven narratives that can be stored and accessed via its purpose designed website. The paper concludes by suggesting that the academy must move away from its traditional skills-driven online teaching and learning professional development programs towards new conduits where focused and shared communal discourse results in a repository of accumulated knowledge accessible by all staff, regardless of their level of technological literacy.

Promoting Online Engagement: Learning from Past Experiences

Despite the fact that university administrators have used a multi-pronged approach in encouraging staff to move their teaching online, there are several consistent themes that emerge from any analysis (Oliver 2001). Of particular interest to this paper has been the persuasive 'hype' or 'hard-sell' related to online education and especially recognition of an increasingly diverse student cohort that demand greater flexibility across a range of online teaching and learning activities. The extent to which this influential discourse has impacted on the decision making process within the academy is not surprising, for it is both market driven, while at the same time indicative of broader peripheral pressures from government and industry for the academy to embrace a more business-oriented model of operation (Gallagher, 2000; Dawson, *et al.* 2005). Complementing the

positioning of online teaching and learning as an inevitable response to the realities of a changing market, the academy has also proceeded along a centralised policy driven agenda that seeks to 'encourage' the staged engagement with OLT across all units and courses within the university. Furthermore, universities have invested heavily in information technologies targeting online teaching and learning (Dawson, *et al*. 2004), with resource allocation in this regard split between the physical domain (computer labs or media enhanced lecture theatres) and the virtual domain (proprietary learning management systems)(McInness, *et al.* 2000; Bell, *et al.* 2002).

The authors of this paper argue that the current multifaceted approach to promoting online engagement has struggled to translate to all teaching staff, the success of 'early-adopters' who were quick to employ new technologies in their teaching. Given the degree to which established teaching practices such as face-to-face tutorials and lectures are entrenched within the cultural fabric of life within the academy, it is not surprising that rather than promoting the desired uptake online, the experiences of early-adopters have at times been interpreted with scepticism and hesitation by less 'techno-savvy' staff. In part, this has been caused by the manner in which early-adopters have documented their experiences within privileged and inaccessible discussions tied to technological tools and functions (Waldron, *et al.* 2005). Unfortunately, this has resulted in an ever widening gap between the early-adopters who are constantly trialling the latest tools and first-time users struggling to come to terms with the institutional endorsed LMS, a range of new techno-literacies and a barrage of unfamiliar terminology (Wilson & Stacey 2004).

Tradition and resistance to change however, only partly explain why the advances of 'early adopters' have not been replicated amongst staff that lack the equivalent levels of technological skill. Jacobsen (2000) for example suggests additional factors such as early-adopters failing to recognise the connection between new technologies and their own extensive skills in manipulating these tools. Yet another reason for the slow uptake of online technologies amongst certain groups of staff may be connected of the typical skill-based professional development programs that target the functional skills of constructing online education sites or the manipulation of technological tools found within such sites (Goodyear, *et al.* 2001). Although it would appear there is no single explanation for the slow uptake of online technologies, this paper suggests that the main causes can be attributed to the current mix of promoting online teaching and learning via policy edicts, inappropriate methods of disseminating the work of early-adopters, and the skills-based focus of prevailing professional development programs (Oliver 2001). It is unfortunate that when this combination of factors merges with the ubiquitous subtext of 'get onboard or get left behind', it is not to be unexpected that a crude dichotomy of optimism and fear in regard to integration of online technology prevails.

Alternative Pathways of Engaging with Online Technologies

In August 2004, the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) funded an explicit project targeting new pathways through which to engage groups currently marginalised or excluded from the online teaching and learning discourse. The Innovation, Technology and Pedagogy, or ITP project, was conceived partly as an instrument to aid in generating new conversations regarding online teaching and learning pedagogy, and partly as an experiment in uniting the disparate interpretations of integrating online technologies around a common focus. It was envisaged that the ITP site, and any consequential communities of learning generated through ITP, would serve as an alternative conduit for a range of staff to connect their teaching with the university endorsed LMS - OLT. It was anticipated that by encouraging new conversations about familiar pedagogical themes, grounding these discussions in a traditional framework of established pedagogy and designing and building a repository where such conversations could be shared and accessed, the ITP project would provide the scaffolding for late-adopters, while also allowing more techno-savvy staff to reflect upon their current online teaching practice. The context of fostering an environment conducive to developing faculty peer support networks can be seen to be analogous with the concept of a community of learners.

Why a Learning Community?

The term 'learning community' is often employed within the literature in a similar fashion to notions of community in general, learning circles, learning organisations and communities of practice. The concept of communities of learners has been likened by Norris, *et al.* (2002) to a conglomerate of discrete individuals who for any number of reasons cement their attachment around a shared purpose related to some aspect of learning. There is a prolific body of contemporary literature that seeks to link the importance of such communities within educational environments and tie the roles of communities to theories of learning and pedagogy (Gabelnick, *et al.* 1990; Shapiro & Levine 1999; Smith, *et al.* 2004). Representative examples from the field of communities in education include those of Lave & Wenger (1991) in assisting the transition from apprentice to master, by Staasen (2003) in diminishing attrition rates of students and Moore & Brooks (2000) in improving overall learning and the retention of knowledge.

An important common thread in all definitions and contexts surrounding the notion of communities in education is the perception that through increased socialisation and peer support the learning process is enhanced. Essentially, through increased discussion and interaction individuals have opportunity to engage with peers in order to co-construct understanding of online teaching and learning in the QUT context, and establish support networks for future collaboration. The establishment of a support network internal to the Faculty was integral to the success of ITP. While QUT's Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS) provides invaluable support regarding online teaching and learning, the number of staff development activities and degree of individual support has a limited capacity due to restrictions with staffing, timing and finances. Furthermore, as illustrated in Figure 1, TALSS has by necessity attempted to offer services and support to all teaching staff regardless of their level of expertise and experience. This paper suggests that by fostering a community of learners within the faculty, TALSS has an increased opportunity to personalise and target staff development programs towards specific online teaching and learning concerns and experience levels. Figure 2 illustrates the affordances ITP has provided for TALSS to develop targeted staff development programs for the faculty. This has been achieved through fostering a cyclic evolution of communicating staff experiences and sharing resources via ITP, which has acted as a central hub of learning resources and experiences, or in essence, a store of social capital.

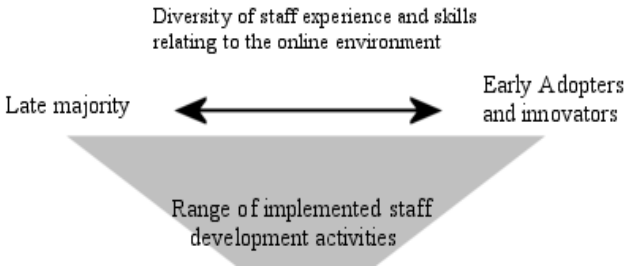

Figure 1: Prior to ITP, staff development programs attempted to cater to all staff experiences and skill levels with respect to online teaching and learning

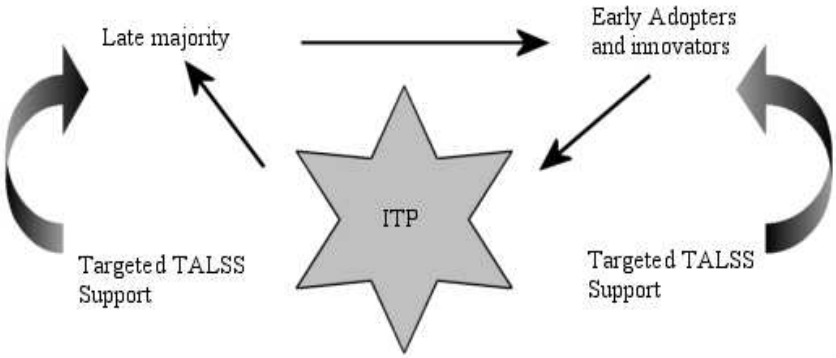

Figure 2: Introduction of ITP enabled a targeted staff development program from the central teaching and learning support services (TALSS)

ITP Project

The ITP project proposal was written and submitted to the Dean of the Faculty of Education at QUT in July 2004. The proposal clearly distanced itself from the current technological tool-based paradigm of reporting and promoting online tools such as *discussion forums*, *chat rooms* or *quiz* and the affordances they make possible. The proposal suggested exploring the benefits of redirecting the attention of staff away from the OLT-based ICT tools and back toward the key themes of sound pedagogy. It was suggested that funding be provided for a small group of staff to design and construct a virtual space where communities of staff could share their experiences of OLT through pedagogically driven narratives. Central to the proposal was the suggestion that the creation of a pedagogically driven space or reflective community of OLT learning would allow for all staff to better scaffold their engagement with the online teaching and learning environment. The proposal was approved in August 2004 and at this time the Dean distributed an email across the Faculty seeking expressions of interest from staff who wished to participate.

Getting ITP Off the Ground

Although the Faculty of Education funded the project, QUT's TALSS contributed significantly through the provision of their Faculty Learning and Teaching Consultant (LTC). Both the Faculty-based coordinator and the LTC devoted considerable initial time and discussion regarding the proposed composition of the ITP working group. Although there were clearly a number of staff within the Faculty who could be identified as early-adopters, it was determined to be critical to have representatives with a range of online teaching and learning expertise. The desire to bring together a diversity of experiences and expertise was to ensure a range of perceptions and concerns were reflected throughout the project cycle. Staff nominations to the ITP working group were also based on the individual's desire to construct a new roadmap that would assist the Faculty in the re-conceptualisation of online teaching and learning within the more familiar framework of pedagogy. In conjunction with the email sent by the Dean requesting expressions of interest, both ITP coordinators proactively sought out, spoke to and encouraged staff to join across a range of disciplines such as film and media education, ICT education and pedagogical theory. The final working group constituted eleven Faculty-based staff, the LTC and a Faculty Library liaison staff member.

Initial meetings of the working group centred on discussing the aims and outcomes of ITP and examining the range of mechanisms through which the deliverables could be achieved. The group initially acknowledged the primary inhibitors to OLT adoption within the Faculty– workload, technical literacy, and relating online tools to specific online activities. In order to address these issues the working group conceptualised the specific deliverables and outcomes for the ITP project. The common themes to emerge from these discussions were that the final product had to be structured around the key components of sound pedagogy, be presented in a non-technical

fashion, be easily navigated, provide useful resources such as templates that could be inserted directly into OLT sites, and ultimately be the first point of call for staff to use in a 'just-in-time' manner as issues arose on their OLT sites. All ITP members had access to the project website in order to facilitate communication amongst the group and to monitor the ongoing development and progression of the various components and tasks associated with the project.

The initial unstructured discussions of ITP were followed by a series of fortnightly meetings that attempted to distil the key pedagogical themes that the group believed were common in effective teaching and learning situations (both face-to-face and online). At the same time the group discussed how it may be possible to transfer, or to represent these within the context of OLT. These conversations were far from straightforward, for although the group quickly produced what they understood to be the key components of effective pedagogy, there was little agreement on how these common threads could be represented within the online environment. The team eventually agreed on a hierarchical structure that encouraged user exploration of the resource. This consisted of five main headings diagrammatically represented, under which there would be a series of sub-themes as presented in Table 1. Each major section was then further linked to aspects of OLT that would facilitate a facet of the teaching and learning cycle. The highest priority was given to designing sub-headings that could be understood in lay terms, resulting in a final inventory where technical descriptions of tools or functions were ignored.

Innovation Technology Pedagogy Home				
Getting started and policies/ procedures	*Enhancing communication*	*Managing materials and content*	*Improving student reflection*	*Encouraging students to work together*
How will OLT support my teaching?	Structuring individual/ group reflections	Sharing resources, ideas and content	Facilitating engagement	Establishing and managing group work
Accessing help and support	Real time chat	Video to complement lecture content	Unstructured student initiated discussion	Peer communication
SET/SEU feedback loops	Group work	Providing lecture notes and slides	Structured student initiated discussion	Assessing group work
Email and voicemail guidelines	Community development	Managing assessment	Collaborative activities	Promoting shared resources
Online learning and teaching policy	Engagement and discussion	Checking for understanding	Evaluating performance	Facilitating group cohesion
Business continuity plan				

Table 1: Major and sub-themes represented within the ITP project

The team having reached agreement on the various components, then set about designing and constructing a series of templates and explanations of the functions/tools that would be located within a distinct navigational structure. It was determined that the team would work in smaller groups, each focusing on a major theme. Importantly, all members appreciated the need to emphasise the designed learning episodes in terms of teaching and learning practices in contrast to technical jargon that would result in an overall disengagement by staff with minimal technical literacy and experience. Additionally, there were several meetings that focused solely on generating a consistent 'feel' across all the explanations and ensuring that the register was professionally focused on pedagogy, while at the same time retaining a peer-to-peer sensitivity. By far the major problem encountered by the groups was avoiding an over-reliance on technical description. In some cases, particularly those focusing on video streaming, this was particularly problematic. However, by keeping the technology and description of the related tools as much as possible in the background, all the groups managed to produce a consistent and coherent series of non-technical narratives. The final task each of the groups performed was to write and record on video short explanatory segments linked to the sections they had written. It was envisaged that

staff who were previously unresponsive to technical accounts or explanations, would more readily accept personalised conversations regarding the underlying pedagogy, written and recorded by peers within the Faculty. Furthermore, the promotion of Faculty staff within the ITP site emphasises the community based approach that was adopted. Teaching staff considering the integration of particular ITP promoted learning episodes are encouraged to liaise directly with a faculty colleague regarding implementation processes and evaluations. This 'just-in-time' model of professional development de-emphasises the overall reliance on teaching support services and emphasises the existing expertise located within the Faculty.

In conjunction with the production of explanatory narratives, was also the issue of how this material should be represented online. As mentioned above, the project sort to structure the material in such a way that the actual technological tools would be hidden as much as practical. Three criteria were developed for the graphical representation of the ITP narratives. First, the site needed to be easily navigated and promote further exploratory behaviour. Secondly, it needed to retain its overall focus on pedagogy, and finally, it needed to be functional in that it provided uses with pre-developed templates for immediate incorporation into an OLT site. The final design used a series of expanding wheels to represent the five initial starting points as represented in figure 3 below.

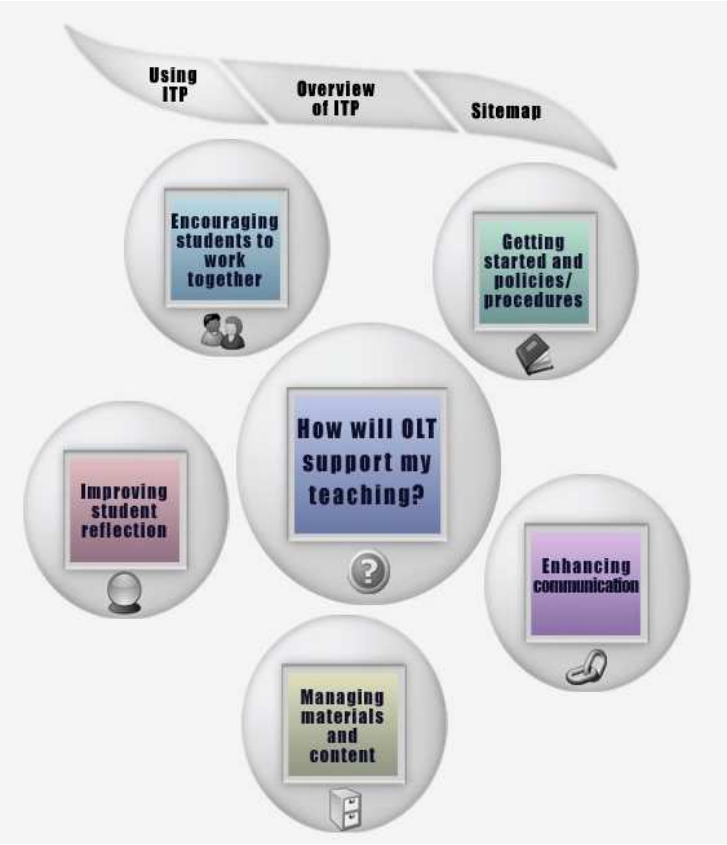

Figure 3: representation of the ITP site design

From each of these main headings users could navigate to the next level of the site where for example 'Enhancing communication' contained another expanding wheel of sub-categories that included; Structuring individual/ group reflections, Real time chat, Group work, Community development and Engagement and discussion. At the granular level the site contained current exemplars detailing the pedagogical rationale for implementation and links to specific designed templates mimicking the stated examples. During the last six months of the project a learning designer was employed by the Faculty to work on inserting the video and draw to a close the final aspects such as testing the multiple links and pages. The Learning Designer also conducted

workshops regarding ITP in each of the schools within the faculty. These workshops were seen to be a critical component of the overall project for not only did they facilitate acceptance of ITP as a resource for mainstream adoption, they also provided opportunity for the initiation of the ongoing social interactions and discourse necessary for the development of peer support networks.

Preliminary Analysis

While a formal evaluation of the project is still to be finalised, an initial analysis of ITP has indicated that the stated aims and outcomes emanating from the project have been achieved. A primary goal of the project was to redirect conversations towards an online pedagogy divorced of technical specificities. Discussions and feedback from faculty indicate that the project has been successful in fostering a pedagogical dialogue concerned more with the development of learning activities than the specific integration of online tools.

At the time of writing over 194 individual/distinct staff users had accessed the site in the previous 5 months. This data indicates that large numbers of staff within the Faculty are accessing the sites and using it as an alternative to the OLT Support line. Data linked to the number of calls to OLT Support shows a dramatic drop from 113 Faculty-based calls in March 2004, to 41 in March 2005. This data, combined with anecdotal feedback from school-based Online Teaching Advisors indicates that staff from both ends of the technological skill spectrum have found the site invaluable in the preparation of the online teaching and learning sites. Evaluation of the degree of adoption of OLT tools indicates that the faculty has generally increased the implementation of online engagement resources such as group work areas, discussion forums and student reflective notepads. Table 2 illustrates the percentage increase from the close of semester 2, 2004 to April of semester 1, 2005.

OLT Resource	Percentage increase
Chat room	-7%
Group work	51%
Notepad	256%
Discussion topics	124%
Dynamic Table	151%
IMET	132%
Media file	-2%

Table 2: Reported faculty increase in uptake of specific OLT resources

Whilst the data indicates greater adoption rates among the education faculty, ongoing monitoring of the overall pedagogical quality of the designed online learning episodes and types of resources integrated into the unit curricula will provide a more holistic interpretation of the overall success of the ITP project.

Conclusion

Despite a clear commitment at the university and Faculty level seeking to encourage staff to engage with OLT, this paper has suggested a core body of the teaching staff remain resistant to adopting or integrating online technologies with unit curricula. The paper has argued that a primary causality for the slow or resistant uptake of OLT in the QUT context, can be attributed to an over reliance on policy, fundamental flaws in the manner in which advances made by early-adaptors have been disseminated and promoted and an over reliance on skill or tool-based professional development. This paper represents an overt challenge to the current paradigm that positions the adoption of ICT-enhanced teaching and learning cycles as a series of practical engagements with technological tools and the appropriation of such tools within online learning management systems. By naively promoting new technologies and tools within online teaching and learning as the primary motivation to engage, it has been suggested that the dynamics of

current practice unwittingly reproduce existing technological skill divisions in increasingly inequitable terms.

This paper has highlighted the importance of allowing clusters of staff to be given new mechanisms through which a pedagogical understanding of their teaching can be applied to a contextualized online environment. Furthermore, not only can clusters of late-adopters be encouraged to engage with online technologies via conduits such as ITP, but also such mechanisms allow for the generation of new communities of learning containing the full spectrum of technical engagement. Although the completed ITP has only been running for a single semester, evidence suggests that much can be gained from a better understanding of how communities of learning emerge within professional development locations and the importance of embracing both aligned and resistant groups in the process. The paper concludes with the recommendation that the academy must support the continued exploration of alternative models where distinctive cultures and communities of learning involve the full spectrum of staff in a process of enhancing the pool of collective online learning and teaching knowledge.

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